COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Harlem Renaissance

By Jessica McBirney
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A "renaissance" is a period of great artistic and intellectual activity. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that took place in Harlem, New York City, during the 1920s. This informational text discusses how the movement developed, as well as its impact on America. As you read, take notes on the various artists of the Harlem Renaissance and how they contributed to the movement.

[1] The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic and cultural explosion among African Americans living in Harlem in the 1920s. It produced some of the greatest artists, musicians, and writers in American history, and expanded the shared cultural identity of people who have been marginalized[1] for hundreds of years.

"D. Gillespie, J. Lewis, C. Payne, M. Davis, R. Brown" by Gottlieb, William P. is in the public domain.

Why Harlem?

After the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished[2] in 1865, many African Americans remained in Southern states, where plantations on which their families had once been enslaved still stood. Many people found jobs as farm laborers, doing essentially the same work as before the abolishment of slavery but now for a meager wage. Over the next few decades, the federal government made some attempts to secure the rights and better the welfare of African Americans but to little impact. Particularly in the South, segregation,[3] racist attitudes, and violence prevented African Americans from improving their circumstances. The governing bodies of Southern states often worsened the hardships that African Americans faced by passing racially

1. **Marginalize** ***(verb)*** to assign someone to a powerless or unimportant position within a society or group
2. **Abolish** ***(verb)*** to put an end to; to outlaw
3. the separation of individuals or groups, especially based on race

discriminatory[4] laws.

In the early 1900s, African Americans began moving to the North in the hopes of finding better paying jobs in city factories instead of on farms. This movement was known as The Great Migration. Black neighborhoods formed in cities all over the North, including New York City. Harlem, a neighborhood originally built for a white, upper-middle class population, was one of these. In 1910, a group of African American realtors purchased several blocks in the area and opened the neighborhood to Black migrants from the South. Not only did African Americans settle there but Caribbean immigrants seeking a better life did, as well. These immigrants, some of whom were former slaves, also faced discrimination and oppression[5] in their home countries.

Art Confronting Racism

African Americans still faced hostility and institutionalized[6] racism after migrating to the North. Labor and housing discrimination made it difficult for African Americans to settle in Northern cities. Violence from white people who resented the presence of Black migrants new to the cities occurred frequently.

[5] African Americans encountered many harmful stereotypes[7] throughout American society. An early major cultural event of the Harlem Renaissance was a 1917 theater production called *Three Plays for a Negro Theater* that rejected many of these stereotypes. It was one of the first mainstream productions about African Americans to actually cast Black actors portraying complex[8] emotions. Two years later, poet Claude McKay published the sonnet "If We Must Die." Although the poem never addressed race directly, African American readers found its message of defiance inspiring as violence toward Black people continued throughout the country. Literature created during the Harlem Renaissance provided insight[9] into the everyday life of African Americans and emphasized their humanity and brilliance. This went against the stereotypical depictions[10] of African Americans in popular culture.

The Harlem Renaissance did not promote a specific political viewpoint or artistic style. Rather, it

4. **Discrimination** ***(noun)*** the practice of unfairly treating a person or group differently from other people or groups of people
5. **Oppression** ***(noun)*** the cruel or unfair treatment of a group of people
6. **Institutionalized** ***(adjective)*** created and controlled by an established organization; established as an accepted part of a system or culture
7. **Stereotype** ***(noun)*** an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about a person or group of people with a particular characteristic
8. **Complex** ***(adjective)*** not easy to understand or explain; not simple
9. understanding
10. **Depiction** ***(noun)*** a representation of someone or something, especially in words or images

was a chance for African American artists to use their art to express pride in their identities and share their experiences. Artists held the belief that through intellect, literature, art, and music, their work could challenge racism and shift American society to embrace, protect, and celebrate Black people and their contributions.

Literature and Music

Literature was one of the most powerful tools African American artists used during the Harlem Renaissance. Writers at the time popularized the idea of the "New Negro." This was an identity they hoped all African Americans would embrace, one of assertiveness[11] and a refusal to submit to the racial prejudice[12] and segregation that had plagued them for so long.

The most famous writer to emerge from this period was Langston Hughes. He was a poet who decided to ignore many of the conventional[13] rules for poetry in favor of a more rhythmic approach, drawn from African American music like traditional spirituals and the blues. He wrote about the many struggles African Americans faced, but a theme of hope and overcoming hardship ran through much of his work.

Music was another central component[14] of the Harlem Renaissance. As jazz continued to grow in popularity during the 1920s, musicians in Harlem put their own spin on the music; one such style was known as the Harlem Stride. Musicians added piano to the brass instruments of jazz. Many famous jazz musicians rose to stardom during this period, including Duke Ellington. Like poetry, music in Harlem also included elements from Black spiritual songs and the blues.

A Deep and Lasting Impact

[10] Not only did the Harlem Renaissance produce new and exciting art, literature, and music, it also helped to shape and express what it meant to be Black in America. For hundreds of years, Black people had been enslaved and oppressed in the Americas, denied their history and identity. Thus, it was important to foster a collective[15] cultural heritage in which to take pride. It also made larger American society more aware of the gifts, perspectives, and struggles of African Americans. Finally, it laid important groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement several decades later.

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11. **Assertive** ***(adjective)*** bold or confident
12. **Prejudice** ***(noun)*** an unfair feeling of dislike for a person or group because of race, sex, religion, etc.
13. **Conventional** ***(adjective)*** usual or traditional
14. **Component** ***(noun)*** a part of something
15. **Collective** ***(noun)*** shared by a group

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text?
    A. The Harlem Renaissance was the first major artistic movement in American history.
    B. The Harlem Renaissance was a period of increased migration of African Americans to the North.
    C. During the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans used art to convey their experiences and create a united cultural identity.
    D. During the Harlem Renaissance, civil rights activists overturned many racist laws in the South and overcame prejudice in the North.

2. PART B: Which quotation from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "It produced some of the greatest artists, musicians, and writers in American history" (Paragraph 1)
    B. "In the early 1900s, African Americans began moving to the North in the hopes of finding better paying jobs in city factories instead of on farms." (Paragraph 3)
    C. "it was a chance for African American artists to use their art to express pride in their identities and share their experiences." (Paragraph 6)
    D. "it laid important groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement several decades later." (Paragraph 10)

3. How did the Great Migration contribute to the development of the Harlem Renaissance?
    A. Many African Americans returned to the South after they achieved fame and success during the Harlem Renaissance.
    B. Many African Americans left the South to settle in the North, drawn by the cultural movement of the Harlem Renaissance.
    C. Many African Americans returned to the South to reclaim their history, leading to the development of the Harlem Renaissance.
    D. Many African Americans left the South to forge a new path for themselves in the North, leading to the development of the Harlem Renaissance.

4. Which quotation from the text best describes African Americans' experiences in the South in the 1800s and 1900s?

    A. "segregation, racist attitudes, and violence prevented African Americans from improving their circumstances." (Paragraph 2)

    B. "In the early 1900s, African Americans began moving to the North in the hopes of finding better paying jobs in city factories instead of on farms." (Paragraph 3)

    C. "In 1910, a group of African American realtors purchased several blocks in the area and opened the neighborhood to Black migrants from the South." (Paragraph 3)

    D. "Violence from white people who resented the presence of Black migrants new to the cities occurred frequently." (Paragraph 4)

5. How does the inclusion of details about Harlem Renaissance artists contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How can art be a form of protest? Why was art a successful means for African Americans to challenge discrimination and offensive stereotypes during this time?

2. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How does the text explore ways in which America has changed since the abolition of slavery? How did the accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance allow future change to take place?

3. In the context of the text, how are communities formed? How did the Harlem Renaissance contribute to the establishment of an African American culture and identity in America? How do you think this community benefited the Civil Rights Movement decades later?